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BIRDWATCHING IN RAJKOT

John Keay & Julian Keay

In the space of a few hours spent walking within 3 miles of the centre of Rajkot we saw 65 different species of bird. In Europe one would be lucky under similar circumstances to see half that number. The variety of Indian birds speaks for itself but what strikes the foreign visitor even more is their accessibility, even their tameness. A pair of wiretailed swallows left their search for insects over a small pool and settled on a rock just six feet from where we stood. If the pheasant-tailed jacana had been in full plumage we would have been almost stepping on its tail before it deigned to take wing and display his flight pattern. Even the pelicans apparently riding at anchor like a fleet of sailing boats just off the edge of a large reservoir allowed us to approach far closer than would any but the commonest of the wary waterbirds of Europe.

I must admit that on our own we would never have positively identified all 65 species. But in the person of Mr Lavkumar we were fortunate in having a guide with an exceptional knowledge of the birds, and what is perhaps the most international

trait of the birdwatcher, a real affection for them. Left to our own devices the subtler characteristics of the short-toed lark and greyheaded finch-lark or the pied- and the rufoustailed chat would have been lost in our excitement to see a purple moorhen. But with Mr Lavkumar no bird, however sober or common, was ignored. We were able to identify four different dove and pigeon species, six different ducks including the minute cotton teal and the beautiful brahmyny, and three different babblers - for a European perhaps the most confusing genus of all. We learnt something of the mythical significance of the Indian robin and the Sarus crane and the peacock and were able to distinguish the Indo-European and Siberian variations of the swallows and sand martins.

There were moments when our companion must have been a little amazed by our enthusiasm. The hoopoe is a common enough bird in India but its appearance in Western Europe is a great event for birdwatchers. However many one sees in a tour of the subcontinent it is difficult to accept it as readily as the crow or sparrow. The same applies to the pariah kite whilst the marsh harrier which we almost confused with it is now restricted in England to just a very few carefully protected reserves. Also classed as rare visitors or dwindling species in Western Europe are the purple heron, the ring plover and the Caspian tern -- three birds which at Rajkot we saw in five minutes on the same small stretch of water. Several other species presumably common here are not even mentioned in my guide to British birds. The red and the yellow wattles put to shame the small European lapwing and the common kingfisher is outshone by the beautiful whotefronted and pied varieties of India. We have no bulbuls or bee-eaters, not even a myna or a bower weaver yet all these birds were positively common in at least one variety around Rajkot.

Every visitor to Saurashtra hopes to see flamingos and perhaps the Great Indian Bustard. We are still in search of them but if we leave without seeing them I shall not be disappointed. That stretch of water at the end of the big reservoir was more than compensation. On the banks were sandgrouse, spot-bills, ibis and sandpipers, in the shallows grey- and purple herons, spoonbills and painted storks and beyond them on the edge of the open water that flock of billowing pelicans. A stray breeze was blowing across the water as we left and I wondered whether those half folded wings were ever utilized as sails.

IN THE NILGIRIS IN EARLY JUNE

D. A. Stairmand

Gone were the clear blue skies of January and although there was not much rain in Ooty during my stay from 1.vi to 8.vi.71 the poor light needed adjusting to. There were days of high wind and when this was accompanied by rain it was all pretty chilling except when taking brisk walks or sitting at night around a log of fire. Mostly room temperature stayed around 10°C both day and night. However there was little or no rain at Coonoor or around Kotagiri and at these lower altitudes it was brighter and warmer and when I returned to Ooty from these places I loved Ooty's invigorating climate. Diesel fumes were much less noticeable around Ooty than on the bright, dry days of January but this advantage was offset by the almost constant drone of pesticides being sprayed mechanically on potato fields where once, not so long ago, there were wonderful sholas.

Just outside Ooty on my journey from Mysore I watched a Black-winged Kite over potato fields and later during my stay I saw at least two Blackwinged Kites near the Kotagiri road only a few miles outside Ooty. Handbook Vol. 1 indicates that this bird is found up to c. 1200 m in the peninsular hills whereas my sightings were at c. 2200 m. It would appear that this attractive hawk is extending its range higher.

I had found hoopoes uncommon in Ooty in January but now they were quite plentiful.

There were hundreds of Small Sunbirds (Nectarinia minima) in the area and they were particularly abundant in Sims Park, Coonoor which itself was in fine fettle. This bird breeds in Khandala chiefly March/April and seems to breed in the Nilgiris about September/October according to Dr Salim Ali's Indian Hill Birds, and the birds I saw most certainly were in non-breeding dress but delightful for all that. One brightish day in Sims Park I watched a party of Small Sunbirds, White-eyes and Velvetfronted Nuthatches passing through an area working the trees for insects and there were so many birds involved that the procession took twenty minutes to pass by. Nuthatches were common and White-eyes easily the most abundant of all birds in the area and they, at least, seem to greatly benefit from the eucalyptus plantations.

Quite a number of birds in the Nilgiris were feeding nestlings or fledgelings and it is always a great pleasure to watch these activities and study immature plumage. Some of the species I watched going about these activities between 6000-7500 ft were Nilgiri Pipit, Pied Buschat, Whitespotted Fantail Flycatcher, Grey Tit, Southern Blackbird, Rufousbacked Shrike, Small Green Barbet, Redwhiskered and Redvented Bulbul, Velvetfronted Nuthatch, Magpie Robin.

4.

I came across a few parties of Red Munias and this was the first time that I had seen them in their truly wild state. They were just as innocent and charming as caged ones but probably much happier in their heart of hearts. They may live only for a day in the wild but they live that day happy and free.

Another bird I did not see in January but which was now quite common was the attractive Pied Flycatcher Shrike Hemipus picatus. I liked its longish tail, cheeky perching and agile pursuit of insects. A very welcome member to the Nilgiri bird squad.

The birds that were singing most of all seemed to me to be the Nilgiri Verditer Flycatchers and their enthusiasm to expose themselves to their mates from vantage points on trees lead them to expose themselves to me at the same time. In this species both the male and female sing. Dr Salim Ali's Indian Hill Birds suggests that only the male sings but Whistler supports me and I am sure that 'Women's Lib.' would avidly support this equality of the sexes. In any case it is a very pretty song and species, perfectly suited to its environment.

One morning while meditating happily and unseen in a hill forest just outside Ooty a very handsome Crested Hawk-Eagle (Spizaetus cirrhatus) landed on a bough just above eye-level and only some 20 yards from me. I was allowed to have my binoculars trained on this bird for perhaps three minutes while it pivoted around giving me front and side views, before I was spotted. Then the bird gave a loud high-pitched call of several notes and flew away leaving me very excited and even happier. Such a wonderful view of this bird had really made my day. I should mention here that pairs of Crested Serpent Eagle (Spilornis cheela) were frequently seen and heard over forested areas.

Perhaps my most vivid memory of the lovel male Black-and-Orange Flycatcher is of a sunny afternoon when I sat down in hill forest on a boulder. Within a minute or two a beautifully coloured 'autumnal leaf' floated down onto a nearby stone. I looked again - yes, you've guessed right, it was a male Black-and-Orange Flycatcher.

I will outline here one typically good spell one morning in hill forest off the Kotagiri Road just a few miles outside Ooty. At first the weather was dull and chill and then there was a heavy downpour of rain which I weathered out - rather wetly - under a trunk of a tree and finally it was cloudy bright, very slippery underfoot but a little warmer. In these conditions I was in my element and so were the birds. Black Bulbuls were in the high foliage keeping the forest alive and lively with their pleasant calls. Parties of Rufous-breasted Laughing Thrushes and Scimitar Babblers passed through the area feeding hungrily and calling pleasantly. I had a ring-side seat while one Scimitar Babbler stripped a butterfly of

its wings before eating it. Blackbirds sang a lot and Nilgiri Verditer Flycatchers sang all the while. One male Verditer Flycatcher put a red berry in its bill and held it there for several minutes - whether this was breeding display or not it was most attractive. Also on hand were Redwhiskered Bulbuls, Velvet-fronted Nuthatches, Grey Tits, White-eyes, Pied Flycatcher Shrikes, a Mountain Thrush, Greyheaded Flycatchers, an Iora and a pair of Black-and-Orange Flycatchers as well as Nilgiri Langurs. I watched the pair of Black-and-Orange Flycatchers at close quarters for 1½ hours from a boulder near a stream in this dank, lovely piece of hill forest. I noticed that both birds called - the males' voice weak and the females' even more faint but both were definitely calling all the while as they sallied from boulder to tree to bush. Just after the rain stopped there was a rush of water coming towards me from the foliage canopy. I took this to be Nilgiri Langurs racing across the tree-tops but after the cascade had drenched me in its path I saw it had been caused by two really beautiful Giant Squirrels. They had now stopped and were chattering to each other and clambering around the trees giving me excellent views. On my way down the hill I slipped and gashed a leg but soon had iodine on it and after 3 hours with my feet up at the Hotel I was out again in driving, cold rain walking Wenlock Downs where I watched a pair of Fantail Flycatchers put up a tremendously brave but unsuccessful attempt to save a nestling from a Jungle Crow. In all, a wonderful and varied day fairly typical of my week's stay -- except that I did not always fall quite so carelessly.

Other birds in the Ooty-Coonoor-Kotagiri area included the Ashy Wren Warbler, Nilgiri House Swallow, Jungle Myna, Nilgiri Flowerpecker, Purple Sunbird, Nilgiri Wood Pigeon, Painted Bush Quail, Grey Jungle fowl, Yellowcheeked Tit, Spotted Munia (one pair were nesting in a 'monkey-puzzle' tree in Sims Park), Skylark, Larger Goldenbacked Woodpecker.

Foxes were not uncommon and often abroad even at midday. I was delighted to see these lovely animals.

Once or twice I went to warmer climes near Glenburn Estate some way below Kotagiri and there some other birds became apparent and, for example, the delightful Yellowcheeked Tits became much more common. Other attractive birds there I would like to name are: Lorikeet, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Orange Minivet, Goldenbacked Threetoed Woodpecker, Yellowbrowed Bulbul. Spotted Babblers were around Glenburn and called pretty-sweet as they appear to me do all over Madras and Mysore States whereas our Maharashtrian ones call He'll-beat-you. They invariably do beat me and it is pretty sweet success when I see one. But do birds really have different dialects or accents or is it all in the imagination of the listener?

The Botanical Gardens, Ootacamund were very beautiful.

I hope you will have gathered that I had a really wonderful week.

AN EARLY MORNING IN BORIVLI NATIONAL PARK, Bombay

R. H. Waller

Early morning in mid February can still be quite cold in Bombay if you are driving out in the dark to Borivli Park to get there at first light. However, the cold is forgotten when one arrives to the first calls of the Peafowl as they come down from their night roosts and the lovely liquid notes of the bulbuls - Redvented and Redwhiskered - as they start searching the brilliant red flowers on the silk cotton trees. Then comes the flash of gold and black as the Blackheaded Oriole flies from branch to branch. Such sights and sounds are of particular thrill to one who has just arrived from Europe in the grip of winter, where hardly any birds sing and there are no bright colours to relieve the sombre grey of the season. There is nothing like the elated screams of the Roseringed Parakeet as they swerve and turn in fighter aircraft fashion low over the trees, or the jubilant crow of the Grey Jungle Cock as he welcomes the first rays of the sun. Now the whole forest comes to life with the ringing calls of the Grey Partridge; the metallic and varied notes of the Tree-Pie as he flops from tree to tree; the sweet, high-pitched song of the Magpie Robin; the monotonous tonk, tonk of the Crimsonbreasted Barbet with the Large Green Barbet joining at times, and the explosive scolding of the Babblers in their small parties. One sound that is not unfamiliar to European ears, and is not particularly welcome as there are too many of them, is the hoarse cawing of the crows - Jungle and House. The latter is particularly annoying as, having little or no fear of man, it approaches very near and noisily just as one is trying to record some other bird call or song on the tape recorder. For instance it largely drowned the low booming sound of the Emerald Dove; the low volume but high pitch of the sunbird's song (in this case the Purple and the Purplerumped) and the amazing mimicry of those delicately coloured birds, the Goldfronted Chloropsis.

Other birds are pleasantly familiar to European eyes and ears, some of them winter migrants to India and not yet ready to start on their long journey to their northern nesting areas: the Common Swallow (Hirundo rustica), some of whom had not yet acquired the long outer tail feathers of the breeding plumage; the Redrumped Swallow (H. daurica), not all of which are migratory outside India; the Yellow Wagtail, and the various species of wintering duck, such as Pintail, Wigeon and Common- and Gargany Teal. These latter were seen when we got further into the Borivli Park on the edge of the lake.

On the lake side we also saw Pied- and White Wagtails, Indian Common Pipits, Common Sandpipers, Little Ring Plover, Redwattled Lapwings, Brown- and Blackheaded Gulls, Whitebreasted Kingfishers,

Little Cormorants, Cattle- and Little Egrets and Pond Herons. A Grey Quail in the same locality, that is on the grassland between the forest and the lake, was quite an exciting find; as also a lone Bluethroat - the gorget showing clearly but without the blue inside it, which is acquired usually in the full breeding plumage. Here overhead many Palm Swifts were flying in their endless search for insects on the wing.

Back in the forest again we had an excellent view of a White-eyed Buzzard, which was remarkably tame and sat quietly near the top of a small tree for us to examine his immature plumage; the markings on the nape and back of neck were finally diagnostic.

Others fully mature were seen a bit later. Of the other raptors, the delicately shaped and coloured Blackwinged Kite was seen, and, inevitably, the Pariah Kites and Whitebacked Vultures; also a Barred Owlet was heard and seen briefly.

A bevy of Blossomheaded Parakeets was an interesting and lovely sight; a Rufous Turtle Dove (Streptopelia orientalis), clearly seen on the ground, could have been either the migratory race or the more resident peninsular race, but field identification is difficult; two species of woodpecker: the more readily noticed and strikingly coloured Goldenbacked Woodpecker, and the easily overlooked Rufous Woodpecker, whose colour blends with the tree-trunks; a glimpse of long, black tail streamers trailing behind a glistening black bird identified, the Greater Racket-tailed Drongo; and finally the always exciting sight of the male Paradise Flycatchers, both fully white, with their tail streamers like fish in a pool -- all these were some of the sights that rounded off a most delightful bird walk and drive in the Borivli National Park.

Other birds seen that morning were: Black, and Grey Drongos, House Sparrow, Yellowthroated Sparrow, Green Bee-eater, Common Myna, Small Minivet, Spotted Dove, Redbreasted Flycatcher, Tickell's Flycatcher, Phylloscopus species, Prinia species, Large Cuckoo-Shrike, Rufousbacked Shrike and Crow-Pheasant.

The total was 65 species seen in the comparatively short time between 0700 and 0930 on 16.ii.1972. This gives some idea of the rich birdlife to be seen and enjoyed in the Borivli National Park and, at least from a European's point of view, how fortunate are those in Bombay, interested in the beauties of nature, to have such an area on their very door step.

A CASTAWAY WITH BIRDS

K. K. Neelakantan

Please make my island an exact replica of the Periyar Sanctuary. Since the rules of the game will call for the removal of all but ten kinds of the sanctuary's birds, please remove also every form of animal that may interfere with or terminate pre-

maturely my own existence on the island. If you have to call in St Patrick to banish the snakes, kindly persuade him to rid the island of leaches too.

Birds aren't gramophone records and, therefore, I feel that to impose any kind of restriction on the numbers of individuals of each of the ten species is unfair. I take it that to make up for the lack of variety, there will be a generous quota of individuals allowed of each kind. My list will include the Brown-throated Spinetail Swift, the Yellowbrowed Bulbul and the Scimitar Babbler. Can you imagine just a pair of any of these occupying a habitat?

1. I must have a bulbul on my island. The Redwhiskered would be an excellent companion, but I would rather have a more gregarious species. If you allow only ten species, I had better choose a few that are uninhibited, active and noisy - let it be the Yellowbrowed Bulbul then.

2. The Southern Tree Pie is so conspicuous a bird of the Ghats forests, and one of the most graceful that I must have it. Also, by robbing an occasional nest it will act as a check on the numbers of the bulbul and others.

3. The Southern Grackle cannot be divorced from the tree pie. With its ear-splitting cacophony it will make up for the absence of many other vociferous species.

4. With an allowance of only 10 kinds of birds I can't afford to include any migrants. If I can persuade the Paradise Flycatcher to remain and breed, I should like to have it. If not, give me that dainty little dancer, the Whitebrowed Fantail Flycatcher. I may have to exert myself somewhat to protect its nest from the tree pie; but as I won't have anything to do except watch birds, I shall manage to save enough nests and young to keep the tribe alive.

5. I must have some birds which prefer to skulk so that I may play hide and seek with them. Perhaps the Scimitar Babbler will be the best choice. Its what-ho-ho and Yes dear will enliven the undergrowth.

6. Why not have a bird whose curious breeding habits would repay scrutiny? The Rufous Woodpecker will be all right for this.

7. Another bird with an eccentric disposition is the Brown-throated Spinetail Swift, said to nest on the floor of deep hollows in gigantic trees. I could study its habits and use the techniques Heinz (Woodpecker) Sielmann and Ron & Rosemary (Kingfisher) Eastman to get the first-ever photographs and cine films of its eggs and young. Also, this large gregarious swift will put some life into the sky and rid me of some of the noisome insects bound to be on the island.

8. Let me have the fast disappearing Great Hornbill too. When the mainland birds have all gone, I may be able to supply a few pairs to dedicated conservationists.

9. Another vanishing giant I should like to have is the Great Black Woodpecker. On my island I will be seeing it for the first time. As the only other woodpecker will be the Rufous, there won't be any serious competition for food.

10. My tenth will be the Large Racket-tailed Drongo. It is not only that this bird by itself can fill the forest with life and movement, but I consider it a species worth concentrated study. From '68 to '70 I had it for a neighbour and took more than a neighbourly interest in its domestic life. Though I learnt very little, there was never a dull moment when it was about. To emphasize this by contrast, there was often a flock of Orangebreasted Green Pigeons at the same place. When not feeding, they were so lethargic that watching them could be recommended as a cure for insomnia.

My bonus? All right, throw in a pair of Black Eagles if you don't mind. No! Please wait; I find that I haven't a single bird to foot the forest floor! In these ultra-democratic days one can dispense with kings; give me a flock of Jungle Babblers instead. That will serve to remind me of the city crowds and help me relish my solitude on the desert island.

SCARCITY OF CERTAIN BIRDS IN NEPAL

Reproduced from Nepal Nature Conservation Society's Newsletter, No. 8, p. 2; February 1972/

A year ago the Blackthroated Thrush (Turdus ruficollis), which is usually numerous in Kathmandu Valley, was almost absent. Again this year this species is scarce. Also the Demoiselle Crane (Anthropoides virgo) which arrives by the thousands in the tarai along the big rivers in October, were counted by hundred only in 1971. Both the thrush and the crane are eaten as a delicacy and one wonders why so few arrived from northern regions. Is this scarcity limited to our area or has it been noted in India?

BIRD COUNT IN KATHMANDU VALLEY, -Nepal

R. L. Fleming

Kathmandu Valley count coming up. Our 'Christmas Count' occurred on 8th of January because son Bob and I had only just returned from a 37 day trek in the northeastern Nepal where we checked on birds for our book on the birds of Nepal. The day was dull with heavy fog which lasted until ten o'clock. There were two cars, Bob and five British folks in one car and two of us Americans and four Swiss in our car. Only five of us were veterans.

The first car left at 6 a.m. and headed southeast to Phulchowki mountain (9000 ft). They canvassed likely spots in the Valley then drove to the top. Government is constructing a

a telecommunications station up there and dynamiting had greatly disturbed the birdlife. Reward awaited them at the summit when a flock of 15 Burton's Finches appeared - the first time we had seen them in the Valley. In all they turned up a total of 119 different species.

The second car drove through the fog to the King's Forest on Nagarjung to about 5500-ft above the fog canopy. A Lammergeier launched into the air on a nine foot wing span from cliffs above us. An hour later one of the Swiss ladies exclaimed: 'I heard a flutter of wings right here by my feet.' We threw a stone into scrub vegetation of that steep hillside and out flew both a Spiny Babbler and a Black Partridge, new to our Christmas list. Returning we were treated to the antics of the moth-like Wall Creeper, here from Siberia for the winter. Along the Manora river we luckily found a pair of Finsch's Starlings, bringing our total to 83 species.

Both cars returned to our home in the gathering dusk. Along with high tea, we put our lists together. The excitement of that hour made up for weary muscles and torn trousers. The final count: 2688 birds representing 146 species. Last year was a fine clear day with a dozen veterans who chalked up 154 species. We felt satisfied, though, for we listed some eight new birds we hadn't seen the three previous years.

NOTES AND COMMENTS

Many of our members who are also members of the World Wildlife Fund, Indian National Appeal, must have seen a brochure in which we reprinted Peter Jackson's article 'A daysworth of Delhi birds' which appeared in Newsletter Vol. 11, No. 12, December 1971. The World Wildlife Fund hopes to bring out similar brochures dealing with the birds seen around other cities in India. Capt. N. S. Tyabji has offered to do one for the Hyderabad area. May I appeal to those members who are capable of the effort and knowledgeable enough about the bird fauna of their localities to make a similar attempt. Such check-lists, apart from their intrinsic value, are a great help towards promoting wildlife tourism.

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Mahim Creek

A strong effort continues to be made to save what is left of the Mahim Creek as a bird sanctuary. Memoranda have been sent to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra as well as the Municipal Commissioner, and the need to save this beautiful wetland was discussed in a meeting on Urbanization in Delhi convened by the National Committee on Science and Technology. It would be a great help if those of our readers who are familiar with the

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beautiful birdlife inhabiting this mangrove studded creek, and who recognize the need to preserve this for recreation for our congested city, also write to the Municipal Commissioner and the Chief Minister. Only an alert public will be able to preserve the environment to which they are entitled.

CORRESPONDENCE

' A castaway with birds '

In regard to the suggestion in Newsletter Vol. 12(2), February 1972, I am giving below the names of my ten favourite birds:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Whitebrowed Fantail Flycatcher | 6. Purple Sunbird |
| 2. Pied Kingfisher | 7. Magpie Robin |
| 3. Yellowheaded Wagtail | 8. Sirkeer Cuckoo |
| 4. Tailor Bird | 9. Pied Crested Cuckoo |
| 5. Ashy Wren-Warbler | 10. Golden Oriole |

Prof. Dinesh Mohan
Director
Central Building Research
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Greylag Geese about Roorkee, U.P.

During winter Greylag Geese frequent a body of water about 12 km from Roorkee known as Thitla. During the earlier winters, I counted as many as 70 of them there at a time. They arrive at about 7 p.m. and fly away before sunrise. But as winter advances, the flock may remain there till 8 a.m. if not disturbed.

On 14th February 1972 I reached the spot at 6.30 a.m. (sunrise about 7.02 a.m.). The call of a solitary goose in the sky attracted my attention. After a while the geese started arriving, flying overhead, in flocks of 4, 24, 6 and 6 and all landed at the north end of the stretch of water (about 1 km x 200 metres). Taking cover behind wheat fields and behind a sugarcane field, I got within 100 metres of them and had a good look at them for about 10-15 minutes. A shikari, then, came from behind me and alerted them by the rustling in the sugarcane field. The geese took to wing along with a few hundred duck.

Besides Thitla, Kotwal (16 km), Gurukul Salaru (20 km) and Paonti (16 km) are some other spots in the area where geese and duck can be spotted during the winter.

A. A. Ansari
Roorkee, U.P.

Nest and eggs of a Pariah Kite

A pair of Pariah Kites had a nest at a height of 30-40 ft in the fork of a peepul tree standing near my house. The nest was a platform of sticks and dry twigs lined inside with cotton. The two eggs which occupied the nest had a week's brooding when a neighbour climbed the tree on 28.xii and removed them. The eggs were bigger than the average common domestic fowl's, but not as big as those of a duck. One of them could hold as much as 1.55 oz. of water. The rounder part of the egg had blotches and specks of dark reddish colour, which looked like the blood stains received by the eggs at the time of laying. The rest of the shell had freckles of same colour much sparingly distributed.

T. V. Jose
Bombay

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